

## [Mary Thomas]

[Copy No 2?]

AMERICAN FOLKLORE — MARY THOMAS

LEVI C. HUBERT

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER LEVI C. HUBERT

ADDRESS [353?] West 118th Street, Manhattan

DATE October 2, 1938

SUBJECT AMERICAN FOLKLORE — MARY THOMAS

1. Date and time of interview

October 24 and 25, 1938

2. Place of interview

358 West 119th Street, top floor

3. Name and address of informant

## Library of Congress

Mrs. Mary Thomas, 353 West 119th Street

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

Mrs. Cole, [4?] West 112th Street, Manhattan

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

A kitchenette apartment, consisting of a bedroom and a small alcove in which are an icebox and a two burner gas stove with portable oven. Part of a private house, 5 storied brick, which is given over largely to roomers. Mrs. Thomas lives with her daughter, who is employed on one of the sewing projects.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER LEVI C. HUBERT

ADDRESS 353 West 118th Street, Manhattan

DATE October 25, 1938

SUBJECT AMERICAN FOLKLORE — MARY THOMAS

1. Ancestry

## Library of Congress

American Negro, came from a family who were once slaves but who, before the Rebellion, became fugitives, aided by the Underground Railroad and settled in the North

### 2. Place and date of birth

Born around 1874 in [Free?] Haven (now [Lawnside?]) New Jersey

### 3. Family

Her father was the son of an African stolen from his home on the West Coast of Africa. She lives now with her daughter.

### 4. Places lived in, with dates

Born in Free Haven (Lawnside), moved to this city in 1931, after the death of her husband.

### 5. Education, with dates

Grammar schooling in an ungraded school in Free Haven.

### 6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

House wife

### 7. Special skills and interests

Despite great age, is interested in current events and possesses a keen memory of early history of her family.

### 8. Community and religious activities

Member of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, [132nd?] Street and Lenox Avenue.

## Library of Congress

### 9. Description of informant

A keen-eyed, well-preserved, tidy little woman. Slightly hard of hearing, but has remarkable memory, reads daily newspapers and unusually well-informed on past and present.

### 10. Other Points gained in interview

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER LEVI C. HUBERT

ADDRESS 353 West 118th Street, Manhattan

DATE October 25, 1938

SUBJECT AMERICAN FOLKLORE — MARY THOMAS

As a child I remember hearing the old folks telling me of their terrible life which they led on the large farms of Maryland before the Emancipation.

My grandfather had been a chieftain's son and he remembered the time when he was a little fellow, playing with some other boys on the banks of the sea, and a band of men swooped down on them and carried them from their own people. My grandfather remembered the heavy gold bracelets and [armlets?] of his rank and those slave-stealers took the gold ornaments from him.

## Library of Congress

My grandfather had a black mark about an inch wide running down his forehead to the tip of his nose. This mark was the sign of his tribe. He was tall and very much respected by the other slaves and the slave-holder down in Maryland. He married, raised a family and grew old. Even in his old age he was a valuable piece of property, but soon he became useless in the fields and his master agreed to give him his freedom.

But the old man, my grandfather, asked for the freedom of his youngest son, who was my father. This the master refused to do at first but at the earnest insistence of my grandfather, he agreed ... upon condition that the son, who was a great swimmer and diver, should dive into the Chesapeake Bay where a ship had sunk years before with a load of iron. If the son were successful in bringing to the surface this load of iron, then my grandfather and his son, my father, should go free. 2 My grandfather tied a rope around my father's waist and for over three months the two of them brought the pieces of iron to the shore for old master. They say that sometimes the son stayed under the water so long that my grandfather had to drag him up from the wreck and lay him on the [?] ground and work over him like you'd work over a drowned person.

Day after day the two worked hard and finally there wasn't no more iron down there and they told the master so and he came down to the wreck and found out they was telling the truth.. but still he wouldn't let them go. The old man, yes, but not the son who was handy around the place, an' everything.

But my grandfather kept asking for his son and the old master said that if the tow of them brought up the sound timbers of the old wreck, then he would keep his word and let them go. So my grandfather and his son, my father, between them brought up all the sound [loose?] timber that was part of the wreck. It was cheaper to get this wood and iron from the wreck than to buy it, so the master wanted it.

## Library of Congress

The wreck had stayed down on the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay for over twenty years but nobody except my father had been able to dive that deep. So you see it was just like trading off some of the young slaves on the farm to be able to get the iron and wood.

When the two finished that chore, and it was a mighty big chore, too, they went up to the big house and asked for their freedom.

The master sent them back to their cabin and said that since the old man wasn't no good any more, and it just cost the master money to feed him, he could go whenever he pleased, but the son was going to stay on the farm and if he tried any foolishness, he would sell him south. Selling a slave south meant that the slave would be taken to one of the slave trader's jails and put on the block and be sold to some plantation way down south. And no worser thing could happen. Many a family was separated like that, mothers from their children, fathers from their children, wives from their husbands, and the old folks say that a pretty girl fetched (brought) a higher price and didn't have to work in the fields. These young girls, with no one to protect them, were used by their masters and bore children for them. These white masters were the ones who didn't respect our women and all the mixing up today in the south is the result of this power the law gave over our women.

(The old lady was full of horrible examples of the depravity of white masters in the days of slavery. And while I sympathized with her completely, I managed to get her back to the story of her grandfather.)

Well, when the old man and his son knew it was no use, that their master did not intend to let them go, they began to plot an escape. They knew of the Underground Railroad, they knew that if they could get to Baltimore, they would meet friends who would see them to Philadelphia and there the Friends (Quakers) would either let them settle there or send them to other people who would get them safely over the border into Canada.

## Library of Congress

Well, one night my grandfather and my father made up their minds and my grandfather could read and write so he wrote hisself out a pass. Any slave who went off the farm had to have a pass signed by the master or he would be picked up by a sheriff and put in jail and be whipped.

So my grandfather had this pass and got safely through to Baltimore. There they hid for several days and waited for an agent of the Underground Railroad.

One night they were dressed in some calico [?] homespun like a woman and rode to Philadelphia on the back seat of a wagon loaded with fish. In Philadelphia the town was being searched by slave-holders looking for runaway slaves, so the people where they were supposed to stay in Philadelphia hurried them across the river about ten miles.

(According to the old lady, there were stations of the Underground Railroad all over the East. The Line ran from Baltimore through Wilmington, Delaware, to Philadelphia and there branched off, some of the trails going westward and some leading into New York, with Canada the ultimate goal.) 4 My grandfather and my father stayed across the Delaware from Philadelphia, helping a farmer harvest his crops, and they built a cabin and soon other escaped slaves from among their former neighbors slipped into New Jersey where they were.

Finally there was almost a hundred escaped slaves in the one spot and because they were free at last and this place was a haven just like the Bible talked about, they decided to stay there and so they got together and called the place Free Haven.

My uncle says that he reached there by hiding in the woods all day and walking at night. So many people came from Maryland that they changed the name of the little village to Snow Hill, which was the name of the town nearest the farms from which all or most of the people had run away from. The post office people made them change the name again and

## Library of Congress

now it is Lawnside, but I was born there sixty-four years ago and I still think of it as Free Haven.